The Cycle of Righteous Killing: Psychological Forces in its Prevention

and the Promotion of Peace

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With few exceptions, virtually everyone who has tried to understand the causes of the

conflict and violence in the Middle East recognizes that there are no simple answers to this

question. Contrary to the claims of some leaders, this is *not* simply a battle of good versus evil.

The situation is so complex and has spread so widely that it's not even possible to clearly define

who is in conflict with whom. Most of the world's population is affected by this quagmire, with

an ever-expanding array of national, ethnic, religious, and political groups fighting each other.

Terrorist attacks, government crackdowns, and military interventions have spread to Europe,

North America, Asia, Australia, and Africa. The roots of this conflict lie in very real and

legitimate grievances held by many distinct groups of people. This makes it possible for all

parties to point the finger of blame at their rivals and recount acts of injustice, humiliation,

violence, and greed to justify bold resistance – and to some extent, all of these claims are

justified. Innocent people on all sides have been killed in the name of the causes that each side

pursues to redress the injustices perpetrated on them by the other.

We think it essential to distinguish between the specific disputes over territories, rights,

injustice, oppression, and violence, on the one hand, and the meaning and psychological

significance that people have attached to these actions on the other. These meanings reflect the

inferences and conclusions that each side makes about the motives, evil intent, and very essence

of the other side of the conflict. Our central thesis is that any resolution to this conflict will

require that both the concrete grievances *and* the psychological implications of these grievances

be redressed. Although many peace plans have been proposed over the last few decades, none

have yet attempted to address the problems at both political and psychological levels --- and all

have failed to bring about anything even approaching a lasting peace. We also argue that, although the specific grievances and interests of the various parties are very different, at a psychological level, many of the same forces are at work on all sides. To be clear, we are in no way suggesting that the problems plaguing this region are "all in the heads" of the embittered combatants whose terrorist and military attacks provide recurring justifications for counter-attacks from the other side. And we recognize that solutions to the very real conflicts and opposing interests will be exceedingly difficult to come by. But even the fairest compromises, that provide real hope of meeting the needs and providing prosperity to all those who inhabit the region – as well as the many other parts of the world that are affected by this conflict – have little hope of success if the psychological forces that fuel hatred and rage and lead people to take up arms are not also addressed.

This chapter will focus on these psychological forces. Terrorism scholars have pointed to feelings of injustice, humiliation, extreme group identification (whether the group be national, ethnic, political, or religious in nature), alienation and identity confusion, and nationalist, ethnic, and religious zeal as possible psychological forces that motivate people to support terrorism and war. To a large extent, these psychological forces are set in motion by the policies and concrete actions of nations and other groups who have a stake in the region. But these subjective meanings are what directly impinge on people's lives and fuel the rage and desire for justice that lead them to take up arms. We provide our analysis of these psychological forces with the full realization that they are inextricably tied to the policies of the nations and sub-national groups that are parties to the conflict, and that changes in these policies will be needed if there is to be any hope of peace in the region. But these changes in policy must be implemented in ways that

are sensitive to the psychological forces that have thus far thwarted hopes that policy changes might lead to peace.

Psychological research has demonstrated that hostile interactions are often characterized by naïve realism, the erroneous perception that all parties have a common construal of a particular situation (Robinson, Keltner, Ward, & Ross, 1995; Ross & Ward, 1996). Naïve realism causes people to incorrectly assume not only that they directly perceive the true nature of a situation, but that this perception of reality is obvious to all parties involved. Confrontation is then perceived as resulting from the opposing party's fundamentally different and threatening set of values. Political leaders, clerics, and pundits all provide clear examples of naïve realism. Erroneously attributing hateful values and intentions as character flaws of the opposing group magnifies the struggle to the point of a cosmic battle of good vs. evil. Regardless of the actual geopolitical grievances of the other group, naïve realism makes it seem perfectly reasonable to demonize them, whereas one's own group is touted as proponents of good and the ideal embodiment of human civilization.

Confrontations are typically interpreted as attacks against the very essence of one's group and all that they deem sacred and good. Pettigrew (1979) referred to this tendency to ignore situational factors and view the behavior of the outgroup as rooted in their core essence as the "ultimate attribution error." When specific policies and action are interpreted as fueled by an all-encompassing hatred of Islam, Israel, America, or any other group, it is no wonder that they lead the other side to retaliate in a similarly aggressive manner, which they regard as justified, rational, and perhaps an inevitable response to the evil intentions of the other. This ultimately leads all parties to construe the conflict as an epic battle of good (us) versus evil (them). Consistent with this view, social psychological research has made it abundantly clear that

violence begets violence; many studies have shown that verbal insults and physical attacks very reliably lead to retribution and often escalation into even more vicious attacks (e.g., Berkowitz, 1988; Geen, 1990).

This chapter will use terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986; Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003) to help explain the psychological roots of this cycle of violence in the Middle East. TMT is not a theory of terrorism, but rather, focuses on the way humankind uses culture, self-esteem, and close interpersonal attachments to manage basic fears that are inherent in the human condition. We will discuss how cultural ideology, and the threat posed by differing ideologies of other cultures, affects the behavior of both terrorists and counter-terrorists and how combining these ideological threats with concrete grievances and historical inequities creates an especially lethal combination of forces to promote violence. We will then use these ideas to discuss ways of defusing the conflict and promoting more cooperative and peaceful solutions to the many conflicts emanating from this region.

Terror Management Theory

TMT proposes that human behavior is profoundly affected by the uniquely human awareness of death. Knowing that one's life will surely end creates the potential for overwhelming terror because it frustrates the very basic desire to live. As awareness of the inevitability of death emerged in humankind's distant past, this potential for terror made conceptions of reality that gave life meaning, value, and hope of transcending death especially appealing. Consequently, the cultural worldviews that humankind created and bought into do three things. They (1) imbue the world with meaning and order, (2) set standards that if met provide a sense of personal and group value, and (3) give hope of life continuing after physical death, either literally in the form of an afterlife, or symbolically by being part of something

greater than oneself that lasts forever. Thus, to achieve psychological equanimity in the face of awareness of the inevitability of death, people need to feel that they are valuable contributors to the meaningful and eternal universe that their culture provides them.

Because this protection from the frightening aspects of life is provided by ideas, concepts, values, and symbols, people must rely on social consensus from others to maintain faith in these immortality-providing worldviews. The presence of others who subscribe to one's worldview lends credibility to it and thus increases its ability to protect one from anxiety. Being viewed positively by others validates one's self-esteem and thereby increases its anxiety-buffering effectiveness. Problems arise, however, when one encounters others with different worldviews or who treat one with disdain and disrespect, because this undermines the social consensus for one's worldview and self-esteem, and thereby reduces their ability to quell anxiety. All people need the meaning that their cultural worldviews give life and the self-esteem that comes from living up to the standards of their worldview. From the perspective of TMT, people respond with contempt, hostility, and sometimes violence toward those with worldviews different from one's own, especially if these others treat them in a disrespectful or humiliating manner, because this undermines their worldviews and self-esteem, thus leaving them unprotected from core fears that are an inevitable part of being human. Thus from the perspective of TMT, what is at stake in clashes between cultures is the protection that each culture provides against universal fears that all humans must come to grips with.

To cope with the threat to emotional security posed by those with different worldviews, people often try to convert the others to their own worldview. Political rhetoric, religious evangelism, and missionary work are all examples of this tendency to seek comfort by convincing others of the "truth" of one's own worldview. Zuhur's (2008) recent discussion of

the Western World's interest in modernizing, liberalizing, or otherwise transforming Islam to make it more compatible with current Western values, and how such plans often backfire, is an example of this tendency that is especially relevant to current concerns. Another way to deal with competing ways of life is to simply incorporate the non-threatening aspects of a competing worldview into one's pre-existing worldview. Although cultures may adopt elements of other cultures, this typically entails refashioning the elements of the other culture in one's own culture's image, thereby reducing any threats they pose. A third strategy is to derogate the adherents of competing worldviews in an effort to delegitimize the validity of their opposing worldviews. For instance, immediately following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, American leaders denounced the grievances and beliefs of the hijackers as irrational and primitive and called them "evil cowards" (Atran, 2001). Sometimes this derogation extends to the entire culture associated with the threat, as when Franklin Graham, who delivered the invocation at George Bush's inauguration, referred to Islam as "an evil and a wicked religion," or when a prominent US army general declared that the US would triumph in the Middle East because "our god is stronger than their god." The goal of such statements is to undermine any credence that the other side's grievances with one's own group might have. The most extreme strategy for defusing the threat posed by alternatives to one's worldview is to completely annihilate those whose differences challenge one's way of life. The many genocides of the 20th century, committed in such diverse places as Europe, China, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur are all examples of this tendency.

Empirical Support for TMT

Experimental research on TMT has tested the hypothesis that threats to one's worldview or elevated concerns about death increase efforts to maintain faith in one's

worldview, which often entails derogating other worldviews and those who adhere to them in order to defuse any threat they might pose. Over 350 studies conducted in diverse cultures in over 17 countries have found convergent evidence for this and other TMT hypotheses. For instance, research has shown that when thoughts of death are salient individuals display increased preference for members of their own group and those with similar beliefs and values. Likewise, studies have found that death reminders increase negative perceptions of, and aggression towards outgroup members and those with dissimilar beliefs and values (McGregor et al., 1998). These hostile reactions motivated by an attempt to increase faith in one's own worldview and fend off external threats are referred to as worldview defense. Research has also found that when an individual's self-esteem or worldview is attacked, anxiety increases and death-related thoughts come more quickly and easily to consciousness (referred to as accessibility by psychologists); boosting self-esteem or validating one's worldview, on the other hand, decreases anxiety and pushes death-related thoughts further from awareness (Harmon-Jones et al., 1997; Schimel, Hayes, Williams & Jahrig, 2007). Mortality reminders also increase punitiveness towards those who break societal norms (Rosenblatt et al. 1989), make individuals more hesitant to show disrespect toward sacred symbols such as flags and crucifixes (Greenberg, Porteus, Simon, & Pyszczynski, 1995), and increase liking for charismatic leaders who spout rhetoric about the superiority of the ingroup (Cohen et al., 2004). Other attitudes and behaviors that have been shown to be affected by death reminders include close relationships, prosocial behavior, nationalism, prejudice, risk-taking, self-esteem striving, and sexual attitudes (Cohen et al., 2004; Dechesne, Greenberg, Arndt, & Schimel, 2000; Florian & Mikulincer, 1997; Goldenberg et al., 2003; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Landau et al., 2004). Other lines of research have shown that presenting individuals with supposed scientific evidence

of an afterlife eliminates the usual increases in self-esteem striving and worldview defense that reminders of death otherwise produce (Dechesne et al. 2003). Taken together this evidence supports the TMT proposition that a diverse assortment of human behaviors are rooted in a need to defend and maintain worldview viability and the self-esteem to maintain their effectiveness as protection against anxiety.

Research has also directly implicated terror management processes in promoting support for both terrorist and counter-terrorist violence. Pyszczynski et al. (2006, Study 2) studied the link between reminders of death and support for suicide bombing in Iran by having students answer two open-end questions about either death or dental pain (an aversive but non-lethal experience) and then evaluate two "fellow students" who espoused either *pro*-martyrdom or *anti*-martyrdom attitudes. Without the reminder of death, the Iranian participants strongly preferred the anti-martyrdom "fellow student," but when reminded of death, they strongly preferred the pro-martyrdom "fellow student" and indicated they were interested in joining his cause. Pyszczynski et al (2006, Study 1) found parallel results among American conservatives. Reminders of death increased support for extreme military interventions in the "war on terror," including nuclear and chemical weapons that would kill thousands of civilians. Hirschberger and Ein-dor (2006) found similar patterns among Israeli settlers in the Gaza Strip: Reminders of death led participants who believed it impossible to return Gaza to the Palestinians (a very conservative political position) to believe that the use of military force in confrontations with the Palestinians was more justified. By showing that reminders of death increase support for violent solutions to the Middle Eastern conflict across these three very different countries, these studies document the role that existential fear and the resulting increased allegiance to one's culture plays in the promoting violence as a way of defending one's culture. As TMT suggests, people's

cultural allegiances help protect them from existential fears, and therefore, when these fears are closer to the surface, people react more harshly against those who threaten their culture – in these studies by supporting violence.

Research has shown that both subtle and blatant reminders of terrorism and war do indeed bring death-related thoughts closer to consciousness. For example, Landau et al. (2004) subliminally primed participants with "911" (associated with the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001), or "WTC" (associated with one of the targets of these attacks, the World Trade Center), or a neutral control by presenting the words so rapidly that they could not be consciously detected. Both the "911" and "WTC" primes significantly increased death thought accessibility compared to the neutral control. Later studies have shown similar increases in death thought accessibility among Europeans after exposure to media coverage of either the 9/11 attacks in the US or the 7/7 attacks in London (Gillespie & Jessop, 2007). Vail, Motyl, and Pyszczynski (2008) found that viewing images of buildings that had been partially reduced to rubble by missiles and bomb blasts also increases death thought accessibility, relative to viewing intact buildings or buildings under construction (and thus in an equal state of disarray as the bombed buildings). This study suggests that the rubble and debris left behind after bombs or missiles have exploded provide a daily death reminder to those who live in the area, potentially resulting in increased support for violence.

But feelings of hatred and violence are not inevitable responses to awareness of death. Rather, the awareness of death increases hostility toward those who threaten one's culture, as in Pyszczynski et al's (2006) studies of Iranians support for use of terrorism against Americans, Americans' support for use of extreme military tactics to fight terrorists, and Hirschberger and Ein-dor's (2006) studies showing Israelis' viewing harsh military tactics as more justified.

Research also has shown that threats to one's worldview also increases death thought accessibility (Schimel, Hayes, Williams, & Jahrig, 2007; Friedman & Rholes, 2007). These studies do suggest, however, that in times of war and terrorist threat, when death-related concerns are likely to be more prominent than usual and hostility and disdain toward one's culture by another group is rampant, people are especially likely to support the violence of war and terrorism.

TMT suggests that the particular way people respond to elevated existential fear depends on whether a particular element of their worldview is currently under threat and how much security they get from theses elements. When threats and challenges are salient, reminders of death tend to increase defense of the elements that are threatened. Fortunately, recent research has shown several ways in which this tendency can be reversed. Let's consider how some of the most commonly noted psychological reactions to concrete grievances regarding the policies and actions of the other side likely impinge on worldviews and self-esteem to promote hostility – and then turn our attention to ways this general tendency can be reduced or perhaps even reversed.

Collective Identity and Group Consciousness

TMT builds on the Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) proposition that a good deal of an individual's identity, meaning in life, and self-esteem comes from the groups to which he or she belong. From early in life onward, individual identify is infused with our family, nation, religion, ethnicity, and many other groups to which we belong. As we saw earlier, the existence of others who share our cultural worldview validates our worldview and way of life, implying that it accurately reflects reality and the way life should be lived. This validation is provided most reliably by other members of the groups to which we belong, thus further heightening our loyalty to these groups. Because so many aspects of our lives, including

the meaning and personal value that protects us from anxiety, are linked to our group identifications, there is a strong need to cultivate and defend our collective, social identity (Volkan, 2001). Thus terrorist movements, like any cultural group, require support from the communities they represent to persist and prosper. Louise Richardson (2006) calls this a *complicit surround* that provides the much needed social sympathy to the aspirations of the terrorist group, making their activities part of a shared struggle toward a set of collective ideals.

Research shows that, even when placed into meaningless or arbitrary groups, people still show ingroup favoritism and antagonism toward outgroups (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961). Harmon-Jones, Greenberg, Solomon, and Simon (1996) found that these effects on favoritism toward groups are exacerbated when people are reminded of their mortality, but only when the groups provided some measure of meaning and value. This is consistent with the role TMT assigns to meaning and value in providing emotional security. Existential concerns have also been shown to play a role in identification with real national and ethnic groups. Castano, Yzerbyt, Paladino, and Sacci (2002) found that reminding Italians of death increased their belief that Italians are a distinct and unique ethnic group, as well as bias in favor of Italians. Research has shown death reminders to produce similar increases in negative reactions to outsiders who criticize one's nation, university, or political party (Greenberg et al, 1990; Heine, Harihara, & Niiya, 2002), more anxiety when symbols of one's group , such as flags and crucifixes are treated with disrespect (Greenberg et al, 1995), and greater liking for one's national currency (Jonas, Fritsche, & Greenberg, 2005).

As Louise Richardson (2006) pointed out, terrorist violence is different from other types of crime in that terrorists' (and counter-terrorists as well) act, not for themselves, but on behalf of

the groups they seek to represent. They frequently invoke language that connects them with their people, brothers and sisters, or community and identify with a cherished or victimized historical narrative of their group. Terrorists view themselves as playing a special role in their group's history, attaching to themselves an identity that stretches both backward and forward in time. But beyond amplifying one's identification with relevant national, ethnic, or religious groups, subtle reminders of mortality in laboratory settings have been shown to significantly increase the ferocity of physically hostile actions toward antagonistic others (McGregor et al., 1998). Dunkel (2002) demonstrated that reminders of mortality and killing significantly increased identity-commitment among those who had originally held loosely defined identities. And several other studies have shown that observing transgressions against one's group can elicit extreme negative reactions, even at considerable cost to oneself (Meindl & Lerner, 1983; Meindl & Lerner, 1984). Suicide bombers are an extreme case of this tendency to act on behalf of one's group even when the costs to self are extreme.

In return for their sacrifices, suicide terrorists are given assurances of both literal and symbolic immortality by the groups to which they belong. Organizations like al Qaeda and the military wing of Hamas promote a culture of hero worship within the martyr's community. Posters, commemorative cards, and martyr-of-the-month calendars bearing the image of the living martyr are common throughout the streets of their communities and in the homes of their admirers; in fact, an entire genre of pop songs devoted to martyrs has emerged. Annual 'Martyr Day' holidays are even held in some Middle Eastern countries to memorialize significant acts of martyrdom, much like 'Memorial Day' or 'Veterans Day" in the US (Richardson, 2006). Thus in addition to the promise of a blissful afterlife in paradise, sometimes served by 72 virgins, terrorist organizations also provide the martyr with the symbolic immortality that goes with

remembrance and idolization, both before and after they have completed their mission. Speckhard and Ahkmedova (2006) reported social contagion associated with this adulation as responsible for encouraging 12% of their sample of suicide terrorists to commit to such actions. Accordingly, it is widely reported that terrorist organizations often get far more volunteers for martyrdom missions than the organization needs (Richardson, 2006; Stern, 2003).

In addition to community support to validate its goals and objectives and encourage members to make the ultimate sacrifice, terrorist movements require members of the community to provide planning, leadership, funding, public relations, and a steady stream of volunteers to serve as foot soldiers. Very rarely, have terrorist attacks been planned and executed without the material or social support of at least some outside members of the relevant community. Terrorist organizations receive an enormous amount of voluntary financial support from their relevant communities. Such support bolsters the group's perception that the community approves of their goals and tactics and that therefore their violent acts are righteous and should be continued.

Community support for terrorism is encouraged by awareness of injustices, humiliation and mistreatment of group members by the more powerful enemy. In has been argued that terrorist attacks, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US, are planned specifically for the purpose of eliciting extreme retaliation from the enemy, thereby uniting the community behind the radical agenda (Richardson, 2006). If this was the case, the 9/11 attacks have surely succeeded ("Terrorism analyst: National intelligence", 2007). Unable to wage war against Coalition armies, members of these humiliated Muslim communities have invested support in organizations like al Qaeda to combat the foreign occupation. And, since the 2003 invasion of Iraq there have been more suicide bombings in that country than the worldwide total of suicide attacks since 1981 (Richardson, 2006). Mogahed ("New Poll of Islamic World," 2006) reported

that from 2004-2006, the Middle East witnessed a threefold increase in the number of terrorist acts perpetrated in the region relative to the previous two years, and the year 2007 set an all-time record for number of terrorist attacks in Iraq (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2007).

Humiliation, Injustice, and Violent Reprisals

TMT research has shown that perceiving oneself or one's way of life as inferior brings death related thoughts closer to consciousness and prompts action to restore the effectiveness of one's anxiety-buffering cultural worldview (for a review, see Pyszczynski et al, 2004). Although direct personal experience with injustice has been cited by many terrorists in interviews regarding what led to their radicalization (e.g., Richardson, 2006; Stern, 2003), in many other cases these experiences are vicarious, reflecting the widespread experiences of members of the community. Terrorists and their supporters point to the plight of Palestinians who were humiliated on a daily basis by their relative deprivation in comparison to the Israeli settlers, the prominent placement of Israeli forces and checkpoints, and the long lines and searches involved in even local travel. Similarly, Israelis point to the innocents killed in bombings of buses, markets, and family gatherings as justification for the policies that enrage their Palestinian neighbors (Richardson, 2006; Stern, 2003). Similarly, although relatively few Americans experienced direct physical harm due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the death and suffering of their compatriots on that day are central to all arguments regarding military action in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Middle Eastern nations. Violent reprisals, whether in the form of terrorist attacks or military action, provide an antidote to humiliation.

On a grander scale, organizations and networks like Al Qaeda represent and seek to magnify pervasive feelings of humiliation in the Islamic community. Many Muslims around the world have laid claim to a long-standing collective humiliation in the face of Western and Jewish

encroachment of Islamic holy territory. According to Mark Juergensmeyer (2000), part of the allure of violent retribution is that it "dehumiliates" a disgraced community by staking claim to a moral high ground and regaining a lost sense of respect. Pick (2001) explains how this concept is also at work in the perpetuation of legends and rituals designed to deny the humiliation of past defeats and emphasize the righteousness of retaliation. Terrorism serves as a rite of violence intended to defend one's cultural identity, overcome humiliation, and restore dignity, honor, and respect. Indeed, bin Laden and his organizations promise the end of Muslim humiliation and even a full-scale reversal: to victimize the victimizer and humiliate the West. In a 1996 *fatwa* (religious ruling), bin Laden implored the *umma* to, "die dignified in wars, honourable death is better than…life in humiliation! Such scandals and shames will never be otherwise eradicated" and to "do whatever you can, with one's own means and ability, to expel the enemy, humiliated and defeated, out of the sanctities of Islam" (bin Laden, 1996).

Interestingly, even superpowers are vulnerable to humiliation. In fact, Lifton (2003) suggests that for a superpower like the United States, the very *realization* of vulnerability is humiliating. Therefore, having developed a solid sense of invulnerability, described by Lifton as part of the *superpower syndrome*, the destruction and symbolic desecration of our national institutions (i.e., economy, military, and government) during the attacks on September 11, 2001 was an intolerable reminder of a vulnerability that Americans would much rather deny. In retaliation, the American leadership frantically sought to restore the country's dignity through military victory over the first available opponents. Unfortunately, although the perception of invulnerability was *initially* restored through these wars, numerous scandals surrounding the US reaction to terrorist activities have tarnished the dignity and honor of the nation around the globe. To make matters worse, the War on Terror has thus far only succeeded in escalating the conflict

by renewing the humiliation of Middle Eastern Muslims. In addition to abuses in US military prisons, Western presence in the region has drastically increased, bringing further humiliation and shame to Muslim culture. Victoria Fontan (2006) reports that over 80 percent of Iraqis in Sunni and Shi'ite areas of Baghdad view Coalition forces as "occupiers." An ABC News poll (2004), taken a year after the invasion of Iraq, showed that more than one-third of the population felt humiliated rather than liberated.

Wessels (2006) explored these feelings by conducting a series of interviews in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, he interviewed people supportive of and opposed to the Taliban and across both groups found that Afghanis viewed the US-led war in Iraq as unjustified and a major force in the recent surge of support for terrorist groups. He found the same basic patterns of beliefs in Iraq. Despite their lack of support for Saddam, many Iraqis viewed the fall of his regime unfavorably because it allowed Western powers greater domination of the region. A number of those interviewed indicated that they believed many of their current problems, including increased lawlessness, violence, and rape could be attributed to the United States' occupation. Especially problematic is the finding that many people in both countries claimed to have joined violent jihad groups as a result of the United States' military actions. Within any Jewish, Western, or Muslim community, feelings of individual or collective humiliation all too frequently lead to a violent quest to restore dignity and honor.

Reaching for the Moral High Ground

Under normal circumstances most people refrain from doing grave harm to their fellow humans – besides the moral injunctions against killing that exist in virtually all cultures, killing forces one to realize that we humans, on the whole, live a fragile and easily terminated existence. Because of the distress caused by violating deeply held moral convictions (e.g., Festinger, 1957),

killing typically requires that individuals and groups engage in the processes of moral

disengagement (Bandura, 2002). Through these processes, an individual or group renders the

moral sanctions that prevent harmful and destructive behavior toward members of the opposing

group irrelevant or moot. The moral disengagement process might begin by attributing blame to

the conflicting outgroup members, accompanied by accusations of illegitimately justified

hostility on their part. One's own group may then employ euphemistic labeling and advantageous

comparisons to frame their own hostile response as morally justifiable. These moral

disengagement processes are essential for maintaining the sense of individual and collective

virtue, which is central to self-esteem and need for effective control of existential anxiety. It

often also entails infrahumanizing the outgroup; that is, making them less than human by

viewing them as more animalistic, primitive, childish, or morally unsophisticated than one's own

group. Denying the legitimacy of outgroup hostility, emphasizing the moral justification of one's

own hostile reactions, and comparing one's virtues to another's vices all serve to give the

impression that one's own group is superior and the outgroup deserving of the harsh treatment

meted out to them. Further, if confrontational adherents of alternative worldviews are seen as

lacking the fundamental qualities of humanness, their grievances lose their potency and cease to

threaten the validity and righteousness of one's own death-denying worldview.

A national study investigating the disengagement processes involved in support for

military force in Iraq was being conducted when the terrorist attacks of 9/11 occurred. The data

collected prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks indicate that dehumanization was the only moral

disengagement process not being used to support a military attack on Iraq, but data collected

after the attacks indicate that dehumanization became a strong factor in the support for military

might (McAlister, Bandura & Owen, 2006). Therefore, worldview threat not only motivates the

dehumanization of threatening others, but this dehumanization is also capable of escalating existing tensions into armed conflict. As Louise Richardson (2006, pp. 44) put it, "we see [terrorists] as violating all moral codes in pursuit of power and domination. [Terrorists] see themselves as defending the weak against the strong and punishing the strong for their violation of all moral codes."

Recent research suggests that once killing has begun, subsequent killing is fueled by the prior acts of killing. Martens, Kosloff, Greenberg, Landau, and Schmader (2007) created a self-paced insect-killing paradigm in which participants played the role of "exterminators" in an extermination task and were led to believe they were actually exterminating insects one-by-one. After having initially killed a number of insects in a "practice trial," participants significantly increased the number of insects they killed compared to participants who did not partake in the initial killing. As these findings suggest, once initial killing has occurred, more killing is sometimes used to justify the prior acts of violence, implying that they were moral and just.

In addition to these active processes, support for violence is clearly affected by the actions and rhetoric of those on the other side. As we noted at the outset and reiterated throughout this chapter, people pursue violent solutions to conflicts when the actions of the other side lead them to conclude that such extreme behavior is necessary. Hirschberger, Pyszczynski, and Ein-Dor (2008) have shown that reminders of death increased support for a pre-emptive nuclear attack on Iran among Israelis when participants were exposed to fiery rhetoric from Iranian leaders about the destruction of Israel, but decreased support for such attacks when they were exposed to more conciliatory rhetoric from the Iranian leadership. Clearly, the rhetoric of the opposition leaders affects support for war; unfortunately, our impression is that many leaders seem more interested in "rattling sabers" to prove their toughness and perhaps intimidate the

others side than in reducing the hostility of those on the other side. Hirschberger et al. also found that inducing people to focus on the personal consequences of escalated aggression reversed the usual effect of death reminders increasing support for violence; among participants who first contemplated likely personal impact, death reminders led to an actual decrease in support for military action against Iran. In a third study that examined how enemy rhetoric and personal consequences combine, these researchers found that among persons with no direct experience of war, reminders of death increased support for violent solutions regardless of the nature of enemy rhetoric; after all, living through a long protracted conflict can easily make one skeptical of conciliatory gestures from the other side. However, among persons with direct experience with previous war (e.g., those living near the border with Lebanon), death reminders increased support for violent solutions only when the other side's (in this case, Hezbollah) rhetoric was hostile, but decreased support for war when the other side's rhetoric was conciliatory. Although fiery rhetoric and verbal attacks often promote eagerness to fight, in some cases the costs of such fighting seem to deter support for violence.

Thus far we have been painting a rather bleak picture of the prospects for peace in the Middle East and an elimination of the terrorist violence that has accompanied the ongoing conflict there. TMT suggests that threats to one's cultural worldview and individual and collective self-esteem undermine the psychological equanimity that worldviews and self-esteem ordinarily function to provide, thus leading people to lash out at those who are perceived to be responsible for these threats and demonize them to justify violence against them. Once the other is construed as evil, it becomes one's sacred duty to fight them and assert one's moral superiority. It also appears that violence begets further violence, by motivating people to defend themselves and "settle the score," playing into the view of the other as evil, and encouraging

further violence as a way of denying any moral culpability in one's initial attacks. Violent attacks also leave a wake of death and destruction that keep the threat of death always close to consciousness and thereby motivate even more extreme reactions to ward off this very basic existential threat. These psychological forces are inextricably linked to real world grievances and injustices, but once set in motion, can take on a life of their own that blind people to prospects for peaceful co-existence. It's no wonder that so many people feel the situation is hopeless. But does the TMT analysis of the psychological underpinnings of this conflict provide any room for hope?

Addressing the Psychological Forces that Promote Violence

As we've seen from several of the studies reviewed thus far, violence and hostility are not inevitable responses to the problem of death and threats to culture and self-esteem. Responses to these threats depend to a great extent on the psychological resources that are present in a situation to direct behavior toward particular means of acquiring security. We turn now to several lines of research investigating factors that appear capable of turning people toward more peaceful solutions to their conflicts.

Compassionate Values

Thus far we have emphasized the tendency of people to seek moral justification for violent reprisals against their rivals, and the ways that leaders have invoked religious teachings to justify killing in both terrorist and military attacks. However, all three of the major religions that are embroiled in this conflict contain teachings extolling the values of peace, compassion, and respect for all humanity. Rothschild, Abdollahi, and Pyszczynski (2008) investigated the impact of reminders of compassionate religious values and increased mortality salience on support for the use of military might in the Middle East among religious fundamentalists. In their

first two studies, Americans were reminded of death or a control topic, and then were presented

either with compassionate Christian scripture, compassionate secular adages, neutral scripture, or

neutral secular adages, followed by a measure of support for extreme military responses.

Religious fundamentalists in the control condition were highly supportive of military action

except when they were exposed to compassion quotes from the Bible (e.g., Love your enemy),

which led to a significant drop in support for war, especially when combined with a reminder of

death. Another study replicated this finding in Iran, where death reminders led to more hostile

attitudes toward the Western World, except among participants who were also exposed to

compassionate quotes from the Quran (e.g., "do good to others, as god has done good to you").

Infrahumanizing Violence

We have previously discussed the tendency to view one's enemies as less than human

(referred to as infrahumanization) as a way of making violence against them less morally

repugnant. This infrahumanizing tendency is related to the widely shared cultural practice of

viewing humankind as superior to all other forms of life, and a desire to distance ourselves from

other animals that are fated only to death and decay. Motyl, Hart, Pyszczynski, and Rothschild

(2008) recently explored the possibility that construing violence as primitive and animalistic

might reduce support for war, especially under conditions of high existential threat. In this

study, participants were induced to think about either death or another aversive control topic, and

then read a short essay about how human violence was either very similar to or very different

from animal aggression. Whereas a death reminder increased support for using military might

when human violence was depicted as very different from animal violence, the same death

reminder decreased support for military might when human violence was depicted as very

similar to animal aggression. These findings follow from the many previous studies

documenting the tendency of people to distance themselves from animals and emphasize their uniquely human qualities as a way of reducing existential threat (cf., Goldenberg et al., 2001). They also show another side of the tendency to infrahumanize one's enemy, demonstrating that infrahumanization of behavior can be an effective way to reduce the appeal of that behavior.

Common Humanity

Another value shared by most of the world religions is the idea that all people share a common humanity, that we are "all God's children," and worthy of dignity and respect. Sherif et al.'s (1961) famous Robber's Cave study demonstrated that simple competition between groups can deteriorate into violent conflict with blazing speed. But the Robber's Cave study also demonstrated the capability of superordinate goals and cooperation between groups to restore peaceful group interaction. Allport (1954) suggested that people can potentially identify with groups of any size, from basic family to the ultimate group – humankind. In a two study series Motyl et al. (2008) showed that invoking elements that are common to all of humanity eliminate or reverse the typical effect of death reminders increasing prejudice. When shown images of neutral groups or images of American families, mortality salience increase anti-Arab prejudice; however when reminded of the common humanity shared by all people via images of culturally diverse families, mortality reminders significantly reduced anti-Arab prejudice. In a second study, when Americans were presented with American childhood experiences, mortality salience increased negative attitudes toward immigrants; however, when those *same* childhood experiences where attributed to a foreign author, thus reminding participants of things they shared with all other humans, this negative effect was completely eliminated. These studies support the possible impact of the ideals espoused by many of the world's great peace activists – such as Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, and Bishop Tutu – in discouraging support for war.

For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. suggested that recognizing that we are "our brothers' keeper" would make it impossible to harbor ill-will towards people of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

In a related vein, Motyl et al. (2008) conducted a study examining the effects of death reminders and thoughts of the consequences of global warming on support for peacemaking. When people were reminded of their deaths they became less supportive of peaceful diplomacy with other members of the international community. However, when the death reminder was combined with thoughts of global warming, this increased their support for engaging in peaceful diplomacy. This study suggests that threat of common catastrophe posed by climate change might have the beneficial side-effect of increasing willingness to engage in peaceful action with out-group members; this is a very real case of all people sharing a common threat and needing to work together to overcome it.

Interpersonal Attachment, Moral Politics, and Military Might

Recent research has also linked interpersonal attachments to the development of specific ideologies. According to Bowlby (1969/1982), securely attached adults are those who experienced stable, warm, and caring child-caregiver interactions, engendering trusting, empathetic, and compassionate attitudes toward others. On the other hand, insecurely attached adults are those who received distant, unreliable child-caregiver interaction, producing hostile and distrustful attitudes toward others. More recently, George Lakoff (2002) argued that liberal ideology is associated with secure attachment and a "nurturant parent" moral model in which the individual is empathetic, compassionate, and growth-oriented; on the other hand, Lakoff argued that conservative ideology reflects insecure attachment and is related to a "strict father" moral model in which the individual seeks to uphold moral absolutes, tradition, and remains ever

vigilant against the dangers of the world. Weise et al. (2008) combined TMT, attachment theory, and Lakoff's family-model of political ideology in two studies. In the first study, conducted just prior to the 2004 US Presidential election, Weise et al. found that mortality reminders (compared to control conditions) increased support for the liberal John Kerry among the securely attached, but increased support for the conservative George W. Bush among the insecurely attached. In a second study, Weise et al. temporarily activated feelings of secure attachment by having participants vividly recall a caring, accepting person from their early days. They found that under control conditions mortality reminders tended to increase support for violent military force. But, after priming secure attachment, mortality reminders significantly reduced support for the use of military might to combat terrorism.

Summary and Conclusion

In presenting a terror management analysis of the problem of terrorism, we hope to offer an empirically grounded understanding of the human factors at work in the generation and perpetuation of terrorist and violent counter-terrorist activity. In the vehement struggle to prolong existence, terrorists and counter-terrorists alike regularly fight over ideological abstractions such as religion, national or ethnic communal identities, and political beliefs. These psychological forces are powerful because they are part of the system that people ordinarily use to manage fears that are an inherent part of being human. The flames of conflict are fanned when specific policies, disputes, and grievances are interpreted as reflecting enduring underlying evil essences of the other side. As we have seen, people tend to view specific behavior as reflective of the essence of the person or group that engages in it. Leaders of groups on all sides of these disputes make use of this natural human interpretative tendency, and encourage it by demonizing the other and construing them as intent on the destruction of all that one's culture values and

holds sacred, as a way to mobilize the masses to support resistance movements. In this way, specific grievances become connected to much deeper threats to one's way of life, making difficult conflicts all the more intractable.

Clearly, the conflicts that have now spread out of the Middle East are extremely complex. As recent history has shown us, fair and just political compromises will not come easy. But they are urgently needed and it is therefore incumbent on leaders of all groups involved in this struggle to work toward such solutions. The point of this chapter is that even if such compromises and plans for peace were to be developed, they are easily derailed by the psychological forces that fuel the anger, hopelessness, distrust, and hatred that motivate people to resort to violent solutions. Thus *any* solution to this most pressing crisis must consider psychological factors as an essential adjunct to the political and economic issues that are likely to be the main focus of peace plans. We suspect that new leaders, who can approach the problems with fresh perspectives and minimal distrust from the other side, will be needed to promote the new solutions that are needed. But without a consideration of the psychological forces that lead people to support violence, even the best laid plans are unlikely to yield real and lasting peace.

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